

FOREWORD

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Oral History Interview

with

CHARLES W. COLE

April 26, 1969
Amherst, Massachusetts

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, I guess the logical place to begin is when was the first time that you met John Fitzgerald Kennedy?

COLE: After I was Ambassador to Chile.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any contact with any of the people around Kennedy, his senatorial staff at any time, or. . . .

COLE: No, not until I was actually being considered for the ambassadorship. I never knew how that came up. I really don't know. There are two possibilities: one minor, one major. I had been working with Dean Rusk at the Rockefeller Foundation for more than a year as vice-president when he was president, and it could have been that it occurred to him. But I suspect more probably it was [Chester] Chet Bowles, who was recruiting for the State Department at that time and with whom I had worked for a number of years on the Fund for the Republic. So I'd gotten to know him quite well, and I suspect that he thought of it. And he was actually the one who phoned me and asked me to come down to Washington. In Washington I was interviewed by Ralph Dungan, who turned out, oddly enough, to be my successor in Chile.

COLE: Is this your area?

O'BRIEN: Well, an area, one of the things I did some work on. But in that he suggests that the Cuban missile crisis had a rather decisive effect on the leftward direction of Chilean politics. Did you see any evidence of this?

COLE: Yes. I'm quite sure this is so. Let me say first of all, I sometimes criticize the State Department for not always being efficient and well-administered. But on the missile crisis they were perfect. They told us things were coming, they told us when they would come, they got them there in time and in the right shape, and they told us what to do with them. When we got the word "Go", we were to get to see Alessandri as quickly as we could.

When we understood the full dimensions of the crisis, we were not sure that Alessandri would instruct the OAS [Organization of American States] representative to vote with us because there were a lot of problems. And he had not yet seen Kennedy. That came later. But we were very lucky. You didn't treat Alessandri informally, but we called up and said it was a crisis, and we got to see him within forty-five minutes, which was unusual and a sign of goodwill on his part. We laid the materials on the table--and we'd had them all in translation, too. We let him read them, and we gave him the English. I'm pretty sure he reads English.

O'BRIEN: Did anyone come down as a special envoy in that regard?

COLE: No.

O'BRIEN: You did this yourself?

COLE: I did this myself. We did this all by cable.

O'BRIEN: All by cable.

COLE: All by cable, but it worked like a charm. Within hours Alessandri had instructed their delegates, and, as you know, he did vote that way. And we were very pleased, and we felt the State Department did a beautiful job of it.

But now, as to the results of the missile crisis, I think this was tremendously important in Chilean public feeling. You see, again, it was an intrusion of a European power into the hemisphere. When, I guess it was [Nikita S.] Khrushchev said to some American, "You don't need to worry about the missiles, the Cubans haven't got anything to do with them; they're under our control." And then the people began saying, "Who's a colony now."

Also, it increased their admiration for Kennedy. I think they admired his restraint, as well as his firmness in it. It made them more concerned about Russian ambitions in the hemisphere. It made it clear that Cuba was subservient to Russia. I think Halperin is completely correct that there was a turning around. It wasn't overnight a complete overturn, but public sentiment turned a corner at that point. I can put it another way. I think that had it not been for the missile crisis, that Allende would probably have won. So I regarded that as the most important event of the time I was down there as ambassador.

One of the things Frei used in his campaign was. . . . Do you remember the letter from Juanita Castro, the sister of [Fidel] Castro?

O'BRIEN: Oh, vaguely.

COLE: Well, it was a letter written from Mexico denouncing Castro and his way of handling things and executions and so on and his bloodthirstiness. This was very useful to Frei in the campaign. In other words, Cuba ceased to be--within three months after the missile crisis, Cuba had ceased to be a good word in Chile.

And another thing that hurt Allende badly was that. . . . This was a strange one. There'd been an Italian reporter there for a Communist paper in the November preceding the election. And he had an interview with Allende in which Allende said, among other things, that if he won in Chile, his policies would be very much like those of Castro in Cuba. "Would you make another Cuba out of it?" said the reporter. "Well, that's what I would try to do."

This, the reporter did not publish--that was November, maybe even late October--until the August before the election. The Communist papers immediately denounced it as a false, lying report. They slipped once; they didn't know it was in a Communist paper, and they denounced it as a figment of the capitalist press. But they were smart. They went and looked up all the passport registration records to see if this man had been in Chile, but they only went back to January first, so they didn't get it. So they denied that Allende had ever talked to the man and denied that he'd ever said that. And then the opposition came out with a picture of Allende talking to the guy. It really was terribly effective and most helpful to Frei in the campaign. It was a case where the Allendistas slipped badly.

O'BRIEN: Passing on to some of the Alliance things: Frei became rather critical of them at a point there before the election.

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O'BRIEN: Was there much in the way of negotiations going on between the government controlled petroleum corporation and some of the oil companies that in oil. . . .

COLE: Not to speak of. You see, all production is in the hands of the government, and all refining was at the time. Only Esso had one portion, like a third, of the retailing. But that was insignificant really. Chile probably made a mistake on the whole thing; that is, they should have let the oil companies do the exploration, which turned out not to be hard and expensive and then taxed the hell out of them. They'd have come out better. No, there wasn't much negotiation going on. There was some talk about building a refinery, as I recall it, but that didn't come to anything while I was there.

O'BRIEN: Well, how do you explain. . . . I'm going into some overall things on Chile and foreign policy here--sort of close to winding this up. Actually, the United States had rather good cooperation out of Chile in hemispheric things through the OAS during this time, didn't they?

COLE: Pretty good. Every once in a while the Chileans would balk to show they were independent. But on crucial matters they went along with us.

O'BRIEN: What was, in particular, in the refusal to go along with the expulsion of Cuba from the OAS? What were the domestic and political ramifications of this?

COLE: Well, this was domestic politics. They felt it would enrage the leftists and be unpalatable, even after Cuban popularity began to wane. It was still David and Goliath. There was, I suppose, no Latin American that didn't get a thrill when Castro stood up and defied the United States. This was something. For the same reason, of course, Mexico has never gone along. There was a feeling that there was no need to side with the United States that far. Of course, just after I left, I believe they did break relations with Cuba. And all the time I was there, Cuba never had an ambassador. There was a charge d'affaires. And I think that the Chileans deliberately kept it on that level, though we were quite clear that the Cuban embassy was a center of propaganda and other subversive activities.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any real problems, or did the Alessandri government have any real problems as a result of their position on Cuba and the Cuban missile crisis?

COLE: No. Public opinion was shocked. Even the left was sort of shocked into silence by that. I think I should say this, too. In August and early September of '64 there were a lot of rumors that if Allende was beaten, there would be a rising of some sort, particularly if it was a close election and most particularly if it got thrown into the legislature the way it does for us, you know, for lack of a majority. Nobody thought that Frei was going to get an absolute majority, so there might be a sort of interim between the voting and the final result. Some people thought there'd be rising or revolution. There were all sorts of rumors and talk of people buying guns, that kind of thing. But when it came the victory was so smashing--55 percent absolute majority and 5 percent for Duran and only about 39 percent for Allende--that the left was just shocked into silence again. There was no wild protest after the election. There was some failure on communications, too. The Communists didn't get the word from Russia as to what to say about it for forty-eight hours or so. You could see this happen, you know. Sometimes they got the word, and sometimes they didn't.

O'BRIEN: In the left, particularly the Communist left, did you see any fundamental changes as a result of the Cuban missile crisis and after?

COLE: I don't think there was a change. You know, Halpuin is right: the Communist Party in Chile is more a political party than a revolutionary party. They really do hope to gain power by the ballot. I think what it did was another thing. As you know, the Chilean Communist Party, the official party, is wholly aligned with Moscow. And this happened more after I left than before, though it was beginning to happen. I think this led to the creation of some Maoist splinters; I suspect it's one big Maoist splinter. And I suspect mostly composed young people. The Communists are a little bit stuffy there, you know, a little bit bureaucratic. And I suspect that the young people are Maoist there now, at a guess. I haven't been back for years.

O'BRIEN: Did the U.S. ever become involved in some of Chile's problems with her neighbors? I was thinking of, it is the Lauca River?

COLE: Lauca. We stayed out of that one. But it meant I never could go to Bolivia.

O'BRIEN: How about Argentina border problems?

COLE: We stayed out of that pretty much, too. We did give, I did give, the State Department did give smoothing advice in both questions, particularly when they started to get rough, you know, shooting and that sort of thing. We did try very hard--I tried very hard to prevent the government giving the Argentines weapons, such as planes, which the Chileans would think they had to match. As long as I was there I was successful on that. But as soon as I was gone, something happened, and I don't know what. They gave the Argentines some jet planes anyhow--or sold them some.